

Controlled Choice in Fall River, Massachusetts

Hoping to improve their schools and to fully integrate the area's Portuguese-speaking students, the Fall River public school system embraced controlled choice.

Photographs courtesy of Fall River Public Schools, Magnet Education Program

Some parents have always been able to make choices about the schools their children attend. They could move from one community to another, enroll their children in private and parochial schools, or choose special schools and programs within school systems. Other parents, however, due to lack of mobility, information, or income, have been unable to take advantage of these kinds of choices (Elmore 1986).

Recently, the formalization of parental choice has been suggested as a school reform likely to ensure widespread improvement. Now one of the new educational catchwords, *choice* refers to a wide variety of enrollment option plans. Some states have state-wide open-enrollment plans that allow children to attend any school they wish. In other areas—usually urban districts with desegregation plans—*choice* refers to magnet school options.

"Controlled choice," according to the New England Center for Equity Assistance, the New England Desegregation Assistance Center, and Boston's Institute for Responsive Education, can increase parental involvement and satisfaction with the schools, aid integration, and enhance the quality of education (Rossell and Glenn 1988). Controlled choice differs from other



Since 36 percent of Fall River's elementary school population was defined as a linguistic minority, the system has succeeded in moving every elementary school into racial and ethnic balance.



Doran School has a multicultural curriculum, so these students are encouraged to learn and share their parents' native language, Portuguese.

choice plans because it is specifically designed to desegregate the school system by controlling the enrollment in individual schools based on the racial and ethnic demographics of the community.

Key Elements of Controlled Choice

With controlled choice, a community plans its choices around the kinds of schools it wants to provide for its children. After the community decides on the types of schools it wants, the school district encourages every school to become "a special school of choice," in which staff, administrators, and parents become the planners of each newly organized school. Students and parents are then free to choose among all schools in the district.

Controlled choice is based on three assumptions:

1. More students are likely to achieve at a higher level when schools provide a variety of learning methods, structures, and subjects to match student needs;
2. The best school system is one in which a diverse population is integrated in all the schools
3. More effective education occurs when students, parents, and school staff work together to decide what kind of education the community's schools should offer.

To ensure that a choice system operates on these hypotheses, the program should include the following key elements:

- A citywide or districtwide planning committee made up of school staff, parents, and community. The committee should survey all parents and school staff for their views on different school options.

- Parent information centers and other outreach methods to provide parents with information about the choices. The parent centers must be easily accessible to all parents, with materials available in all appropriate languages.

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- A transportation system so that students can travel to schools outside their neighborhood.

Integration and School Improvement

The Fall River public school system has embraced controlled choice in hopes of providing all students with better education and achieving more complete integration of the area's Portuguese-speaking students into the school population. Fall River is a middle-size, semi-industrial, relatively poor city in southeastern Massachusetts with a school population of approximately 12,000 students in 33 buildings—28 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 1 high school. Since there is only one high school, which is, of course, fully integrated, the controlled choice plan centers on the district's elementary and middle schools.

While the Fall River racial minority population is only 6 percent by federal standards, the system encompasses large numbers of Portuguese immigrants from mainland Portugal, Brazil, and the Azores (who are not classified by the federal government as a racial minority). In an effort to more fully integrate these students, the Fall River school system became the first in the nation to declare voluntarily that any child whose first language is not English is a minority. Then 36 percent of the system's elementary school population were defined as a linguistic minority, and the system became eligible for state financial assistance for both desegregation and school improvement purposes. Of the system's 28 elementary schools, 14 were classified as minority-isolated (having a minority population over 50 percent), and 9 were classified as majority-isolated (having a minority population of less than 30 percent).

To move the elementary schools into racial and ethnic balance, the system's desegregation planners divided the city into four zones, each with one middle school and five to nine elementary schools. The zones have similar socioeconomic ranges and ethnic balances—65 percent majority and 35 percent minority.

Under Fall River's controlled admission and transfer policy, all students

presently in the system can go to their present schools. However, the parents of all entering kindergartners and all students transferring into the system, as well as parents who wish their children to attend a different school, can register at a parent information center. The centers advise parents they can choose to enroll their children in any school in the system, in or out of their neighborhood or even their zone, but choices are subject to available space and the requirements of minority balance guidelines.

A parent center is located in each zone and at the central administration office. To accommodate parents' different schedules, each parent center is open some mornings, some afternoons, and one evening. Their hours and enrollment periods are advertised on the radio and in the newspapers, and they provide translations and materials in the three major native languages of the parents—Portuguese, Khmer, and Spanish.

Thirty-five percent of Fall River students now attend schools outside their neighborhoods. Parents have learned they need to register early to increase their chances of getting their first choices—at the first registration period in March 1990 parents registered 600 students. Surveys show that 90–95 percent of parents are satisfied with their choices.

The district is unable to provide free transportation for all the students who choose schools out of their zones, so parents have to be strongly committed to their schools of choice. The school system does offer some transportation for special needs or bilingual students who need tailored services, but most choice students must arrange their own transportation. Since Fall River has public transportation, all children have access to inexpensive transportation; nevertheless, it can be difficult for children to attend schools outside their neighborhood.

School improvement has always been the driving force behind this controlled choice effort. The district also planned for individual school improvement through thematic approaches to education. To date, four themes have been established: extended day curriculum, which pro-

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vides full-day care for elementary schoolchildren; early childhood developmental focus, which uses individualized structure to foster education; multicultural curriculum, which incorporates a variety of cultural and ethnic perspectives; and computerized instruction, which uses computers to encourage greater learning. Each of these themes is being instituted in one school in each zone; now 16 out of 27 elementary schools have begun such improvement efforts.

A "Massachusetts Miracle"

As choice has been instituted, school administrators have developed much closer working relationships with each other. The principals, who have lost the power to reject students because of behavior or academic problems, are now accountable to the enrollment process and the parental selection of schools. The principals meet on a regular basis to discuss common themes, dropout rates, and enrollment figures; and each is now much more interested in how his or her school is doing compared to the other schools. They have more incentive to recruit good teachers, and some teachers with preferences for certain schools or subject themes have transferred to those schools.

Parents now participate meaningfully in school system activities—the monthly parent council meetings have had an impact on both policy and practice. Administrators listen to the council, and it, in turn, lobbies for the schools.

Has the controlled choice experiment improved education in Fall River? Just as previous research (Raywid 1987) has shown that choice has positive results, so Fall River has seen encouraging outcomes. School climate and parent attitudes are much more positive; there is minimal interracial conflict, but increased parent volunteerism and an increase in the number of children returning to public education from private schools. Achievement scores are increasing, and the dropout rate is decreasing.

The case of Fall River demonstrates, as Joe Nathan (July 1989) observed, that schools can improve and can successfully integrate if they will

give school officials the time and opportunity to create distinctive schools, provide parents with abundant information and counseling on school choice, ensure that school spending on each student will be roughly equal, and do not allow schools to reject students for their past behavior or lack of scholastic achievement.

Fall River has accomplished these things in a time of diminished state aid coupled with increased enrollment. Perhaps the success of controlled choice in Fall River is a real "Massachusetts miracle." □

References

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